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SUBJECT: (SBU) HANOI MUSEUMS CONTINUE TO DEFAME THE UNITED STATES,
BUT INTEREST IN THESE EXHIBITIONS IS LOW

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¶11. (SBU) Summary and Comment: Pol Assistant recently surveyed the depiction of the United States in Hanoi's main military and political museums. Exhibits at most military service and political museums cast a negative image of U.S. involvement during the Vietnam War, but the denigration is on par with standard GVN propaganda. By contrast, an exhibition at a museum devoted to the history of the Communist revolution in Vietnam accuses the U.S. military of wartime atrocities through the deliberate misrepresentation of artifacts and images, while the exhibit at the former "Hanoi Hilton" praises the model behavior of Vietnamese authorities towards U.S. prisoners without mention of North Vietnamese torture of GIs. Despite the continued bias of Hanoi's anti-United States exhibitions, they appear to be largely ignored by the Vietnamese public, most of whom were born after 1975. Nonetheless, we consider the depictions inappropriate and will approach GVN authorities about developing displays more appropriate to the current bilateral relationship.
End Summary and Comment.

¶12. (SBU) Pol Assistant recently visited the National Museum of Vietnamese History (History Museum), the Museum of Vietnamese Revolution (MVR), Hoa Lo Prison Historic Vestige (Hoa Lo Prison, a.k.a. the "Hanoi Hilton"), the Military History Museum (Army Museum), the Ho Chi Minh Museum (HCM Museum) and the "B-52 Victory" Museum (Air Force Museum) to evaluate the state of displays about the United States. On June 28, Pol Assistant visited the History Museum and the MVR in Hanoi. Located in the historic center of the city, both museums appear poorly staffed and ill-maintained. Apart from a group of about 20 Vietnamese soldiers touring the MVR, there were very few visitors at either museum. Focusing on Vietnam's ancient history, the History Museum has on display numerous paintings, sculptures and other artifacts predating the French colonial period. The only reference to the United States in the museum is contained in a caption commenting on Vietnam's Declaration of Independence, which borrows its first line from the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Accusations of U.S. War Crimes

¶13. (SBU) With a significant number of photos, war objects and "torture instruments," the MVR traces Vietnam's "independence movement" during the 20th century. An entire section of the museum is dedicated to the "American War" and revisits U.S. involvement from 1955 with the arrival of American military advisors in South Vietnam, to 1973 with the departure of U.S. military personnel after the Paris Agreement. There is no recognition of South Vietnam's legitimate existence or of the willing participation of millions of southern Vietnamese in the war. A sign at the entrance of the section identifies the United States as an authoritarian occupying force, which launched "a destructive war against Vietnam." While the initial pictures on display are not particularly objectionable,

the captions often provide a dishonest representation of innocuous situations. For instance, a photo of a U.S. officer disembarking from an airplane is described as "American military advisor arrives in Saigon to discuss plans for aggression." Likewise, a picture of a meeting between U.S. and South Vietnamese officials is depicted as "American military advisors command Saigon's vassal regime and puppet army."

14. (SBU) Furthermore, out-of-context descriptions allege human rights abuses and war crimes by the U.S. military. For example, obvious pictures of public political demonstrations, construction of strategic hamlets and Viet Cong prisoners of war are respectively labeled as "mass arrests", "forced relocation" and "reeducation of Vietnamese civilians." One caption suggests that "a U.S. soldier sets fire to a village and massacres a great number of people," although the photo merely shows an individual standing next to a hut with a lighter. Similarly, a picture of an anti-war protest, where a monk immolates himself, is entitled "American repression of Buddhism." Captions of a variety of objects also serve to criticize U.S. military operations. Rotted shackles are used as evidence of the brutality of U.S. officials and described as "chains used by Americans to lock prisoners...Vietnamese experienced barbarous torture by the American administration." Under the combined displays of bombshells and anti-toxic masks, a caption reads: "American planes spread toxic chemicals," while next to it a broken Catholic cross is displayed as "American bombed religious sites."

15. (SBU) Without providing any historical perspective or objective view, the MVR's showing also lacks the customary intellectual rigor of permanent exhibits. Most of the pictures are not dated, no sources are mentioned and items do not correspond to captions. While the Vietnamese subtitles are translated in both English and French, the latter version often presents an even more biased description of U.S. conduct than the English translation. Under a picture displaying a dead corpse next to a U.S. tank and soldiers, the English caption simply reads: "Americans kill Vietnamese villager," whereas the French description states: "Americans conduct

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atrocious human killing of innocent Vietnamese villager."

"Humane Treatment" for U.S. Prisoners

16. (SBU) On July 5, Pol Assistant visited Hoa Lo Prison, the infamous "Hanoi Hilton," located in the heart of Hanoi's central district. The renovated site only preserves the southwest corner of the original French-built penitentiary which was converted from a train station. The museum mostly relates the execrable living environment of Vietnamese prisoners jailed in the facility during the French colonial period. Only the last two exhibition rooms address the North Vietnamese detention of U.S. servicemen in the facility. These rooms depict "the comfortable life U.S. prisoners enjoyed during the Vietnam War." Pictures of captured U.S. pilots playing volleyball and billiards, attending church service, celebrating Christmas and receiving medical treatment are displayed next to a sign stating: "Such is the life of U.S. prisoners in camps. All of them benefit the same advantage (sic); the lenient and humane policy of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." Replicas of daily-life items (cooking tools, leather shoes and hand-knitted sweaters) are also exhibited in a corner of the room, with a sign proclaiming: "During the war, the national economy was difficult but the Vietnamese government created the best living conditions to U.S. pilots." There is no mention of Vietnamese torture of U.S. servicemen in the facility. One wall showcases pictures of famous U.S. servicemen held in the facility, including Senator John McCain, Admiral John Stockdale and Ambassador Pete Peterson.

17. (SBU) The section also provides the usual GVN points about U.S. "wrongdoings" during the war and the "altruism" of the Vietnamese people. A large notice at the entrance of the other showroom claims that the "U.S. government carried out sabotage warfare by airforce and naval force (sic) against the people in the North of Vietnam," but the first photo of the room displays Hanoi residents rescuing downed pilots. Pol Assistant listened in to a conversation between

Western visitors and a museum tour guide, who attempted to stimulate a discussion by contrasting the decent treatment received by U.S. prisoners and the suffering of the Vietnamese people. While the group of visitors remained evasive and reserved, other tour guides appeared more successful in engaging tourists with the standard comments at the end of each guided visit.

Vietnamese Standard Propaganda and Nationalism

¶8. (SBU) Pol Assistant also toured the Army, HCM and Air Force Museums. Large groups of provincial Vietnamese (Note: Most of the tour buses originated from Central Vietnamese cities. End Note.) visited the Army and HCM Museums, whereas no visitors were at the Air Force Museum. Moderately well-maintained, each museum's exhibit provides the standard GVN propaganda on the Vietnam War and blames the "American aggression for the suffering of Vietnamese people." Signs throughout the Army and Air Forces Museums denounce "the cruelty of the Americans and the Diem Regime," but unlike the MVR, there are no excessive allegations of torture and very few items dealing with the issue. Exalting the strength and the ingenuity of the North Vietnamese armed forces, the Army and Air Force Museums' exhibitions also have on display captured U.S. tanks and wreckages of B-52 bombers. The HCM Museum mainly showcases the life and work of HCM, with only a few pictures of "worldwide anti-war protests." The only other serious reference to the United States is a display of an Indian Communist newspaper (New Age) front page glorifying HCM and asserting: "Nixon bows to heroism and humanity, Vietnam triumphs."

Comment

¶9. (SBU) The different exhibits in Hanoi museums still demonstrate the GVN's unwillingness to acknowledge its own failings during the war or provide an objective view of Vietnam's history. Nevertheless, these exhibitions do not substantially harm the image of the United States, since none appear to appeal to the general Vietnamese audience. With the exception of provincial Vietnamese tourists visiting Hanoi, very few Vietnamese seem to take a serious interest in these exhibits, as evidenced by the low number of visitors and the aging, poorly-staffed museums. On the other hand, these depictions are not appropriate for the current bilateral relationship. We will approach the GVN about developing displays that better reflect the positive trend in U.S.-Vietnam ties. In light of our success last year in winning back from the Vietnamese the Great Seals that used to hang in our then Embassy in Saigon and in an unknown U.S. Consulate in the south, we may be able to get some traction in this issue. End Comment.

MARINE